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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

ONE HUNDRED SIXTH CONGRESS

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May 16, 2000

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VIEQUES TRAINING FACILITIES

Vital to U.S. Military Readiness

VOTE YES ON H.R. 4205 – PROTECT MILITARY READINESS

Dear Colleague:

This week, the House is scheduled to consider H.R. 4205, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001. This bill contains a number of provisions that reflect this commitment to military readiness. One of the most critical concerns the Navy training facility located on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. The naval training facilities in and around Vieques Island are so unique and so important to military readiness that the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jay Johnson, has called Vieques, "...the crown jewel of live-fire, combined arms training."

During a routine training mission on April 19, 1999, the crew of a military aircraft accidentally bombed an observation post on the Vieques training range, killing David Sanes-Rodriguez, a Navy contract employee. Since the tragic accident until May 4, 2000, protestors occupying the range on Vieques Island prevented the Navy and Marine Corps from training there. Due to this occupation, two Navy carrier battle groups and two Marine Corps amphibious ready groups have deployed overseas without training on Vieques Island. According to the most recent Department of Defense Quarterly Readiness Report to Congress, these units have deployed with reduced readiness ratings and stated that, "Vieques live fire range access continues to impact [Atlantic Fleet] training readiness."

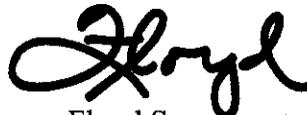
While the range has finally been cleared of protestors, an agreement reached between the President and the Governor of Puerto Rico on January 31, 2000, prohibits live fire training on Vieques until a referendum is held regarding the Navy's future on the island. The agreement also provided for \$40 million in economic assistance for the people of Vieques and for the land on the west end of the island, currently owned by Navy, to be transferred to Puerto Rico. Should the people Vieques vote against a future Navy presence on the island, the Navy would leave Vieques by May 1, 2003.

Retaining the Vieques Island training facility is critical to the future readiness of our naval forces. However, the agreement reached between the President and the Governor of Puerto Rico on January 31, 2000, does not properly provide for U.S. national security by ensuring future access to the ranges on Vieques. First, the agreement only allows for training with inert ordnance, severely restricting the type of combined arms training that is critically needed to maintain combat proficiency and that has been normally conducted at the facility. Second, the proposal to allow local communities to vote on the future of military training at local bases would establish a dangerous precedent that could endanger access to other critical military installations both in the United States and overseas. Therefore, H.R. 4205 recommends several initiatives to ensure continued access to Vieques Island. These provisions:

- Prohibit the Secretary of the Navy from transferring the ranges and live-fire impact area on the eastern portion of Vieques Island from the jurisdiction of the Navy;
- Permit the Secretary of the Navy to transfer the little-used ammunition storage facility located on the western end of Vieques once live-fire training has resumed on the Vieques range facility. Any land transferred by the Navy would be managed as conservation areas and continue to be managed as such after conveyance;
- Limit the military use of Vieques Island to 90 days of live fire training and 90 days of non-live fire training per year. It would also require the Navy to ensure the safety of local citizens, reduced noise levels, and provide for a citizen's advisory committee.
- Authorize \$40 million in economic assistance to the citizens of Vieques once live-fire training has resumed on the range facility.

I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 4205 and ensure that the Navy and Marine can conduct live fire training on this vital range facility in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Floyd", written in a cursive style.

Floyd Spence
Chairman